

## 9 / LESBIAN FEMINISM

I write this chapter out of a conviction: in order to survive what we come up against, in order to build worlds from the shattered pieces, we need a revival of lesbian feminism. This chapter is an explanation of my conviction.

Right now might seem an odd time to ask for such a revival. Lesbian feminism might seem to be passé precisely because lesbian feminism posed feminism as a life question. Many of the critiques of lesbian feminism, often as a form of cultural feminism, were precisely because of this attachment to life. Alice Echols, in her book *Daring to Be Bad*, which gives a history of radical feminism in the United States, describes: “With the rise of lesbian-feminism, the conflation of the personal with the political, long in the making, was complete and unassailable. More than ever, how one lived one’s life, not commitment to political struggle, became the salient factor” (1989, 240). Note this *not*: the question of how we live our lives is separated from a commitment to political struggle; more than that, the focus on how we live our lives is implied to be a weak substitute for political struggle or a withdrawal of feminist energy from that struggle. We can hear a similar implication in Juliet Mitchell and Rosalind Delmar’s argument: “The effects of liberation do not become the manifestations of liberation by changing values or for that matter by changing oneself, but only by challenging the social structure that gives rise to the values in the first place” (cited in Echols 1989, 244). The suggestion is not only that life change is not structural change but that focusing on how one lives one’s life might be how structures are not transformed.

I want to offer an alternative argument by returning to the archives of lesbian feminism. When a life is what we have to struggle for, we struggle against structures. It is not necessarily the case that these struggles always lead to transformation (though neither does one's involvement in political movements). But to struggle against something is to chip away at something. Many of these structures are not visible or tangible unless you come up against them, which means that the work of chipping away, what I call diversity work, is a particular kind of work. The energy required to keep going when you keep coming up against these structures is how we build things, sometimes, often, from the shattered pieces.

Lesbian feminism can bring feminism back to life.

## HETEROGENDER AS WALL

I write as a lesbian. I write as a feminist. This *as* is an individual claim but also a claim I make for others. To describe oneself as a lesbian is a way of reaching out to others who hear themselves in this *as*. But of course lesbian feminism means more than speaking as lesbian and speaking as a feminist; this *and* is too loose as a connecting device. Lesbian feminism also implies a stronger connection between these words. I think it is this stronger connection that makes lesbian feminism a site of so much anxiety, as explored by Victoria Hesford (2013) in her powerful analysis of the figure of the feminist as lesbian. This stronger connection is then heard as a charge against those feminists who are not lesbians as not being feminists. The charge of this connection could be heard not as a charge against something or somebody but as a charge with something. Perhaps we can recall the charge of willfulness: a charge that is electric. The connection between lesbian and feminist is not something that can be prescribed even if some of our histories include this prescription or even if lesbian feminism is heard as prescription (to be a lesbian you must identify as feminist; to be a feminist you must identify as lesbian). The connection is a connection to be lived: living as a lesbian is how I live a feminist life.

Throughout this book, I have been trying to bring feminist theory home by generating feminist theory out of ordinary experiences of being a feminist. The book could have been called *Everyday Feminism*.<sup>1</sup> Feminist theory is or can be what we might call, following Marilyn Frye, “lived theory,” an approach that “does not separate politics from living” (1991, 13). We can think of life as data collection: we gather information. And being a lesbian, living one's life as a lesbian, gives us plenty of data. Lesbians collect information about the

institutions that govern the reproduction of life: it is almost too much data; we don't have time to interpret all the material we collect. If living a lesbian life gives us data, lesbian feminism gives us the tools to interpret that data.

And by data I am once again referring to walls. In chapter 2, I offered a rethinking of heterogender as a traffic system, a way of directing human traffic. When a flow is directed, it becomes a momentum. In chapter 6, I began to rethink the materiality of power in terms of walls, the hardenings of history. We can rethink heterogender as another brick wall, one that is encountered by those who are not going in the right direction. When you are not going the right way, a flow is an obstruction. Lesbians know a lot about obstruction.

But it might seem now for lesbians that we are going with the flow. Hey, we can go; hey, here in the United Kingdom we can even get married. And if you talk about what you come up against now, those around you may blink with disbelief: hey, what's up, stop complaining dear, smile. I am not willing to smile on command. I am willing to go on a smile embargo, if I can evoke Shulamith Firestone's (1970, 90) "dream action" for the women's movement. Talking about walls matters all the more when the mechanisms by which we are blocked are less visible.

**The everyday is our data.**

**A wall can be an atmosphere. A wall can be a gesture.**

A queer experience: You are seated with your girlfriend, two women at a table, waiting. A straight couple walks into the room and is attended to right away: sir, madam, over here, sir, madam. Sometimes if you do not appear as you are expected to appear, you do not appear. There are many who do not appear under this word *couple*: sir, madam. The gaze slides over you, as if you are not there. This is not so much about being seen, as about being seen to, having your needs attended to: after all when the *sir, madam* becomes a question — "Is that sir, or madam?" — you are being seen, your body turned into a spectacle.

This queer experience might be better articulated as a lesbian experience or something women in particular experience: as if without a man present at a table, or a body visible as man, you do not appear. I have experienced much solidarity among women around these sorts of experiences: say you are pressed up against a busy bar, two women who do not know each other, and over and over again, the men are served first. You look at each other both with frustration but sometimes affection, as you recognize the other woman recognizes that situation as one in which she is perpetually thrown, recognizes being in that situation; you too, me too, she too, we too. When women are seated together you might not register as being there at all. For some, you

have to become insistent to be the recipient of a social action; you might have to announce your presence, wave your arm, saying, “Here I am!” For others, it is enough just to turn up because you have already been given a place at the table before you take up that place. I have used *willfulness* to describe the consequences of this differentiation.

Of course more than gender is at stake in the distribution of attention. But gender is at stake in the distribution of attention. Feminist philosophers have taught us for over a century how man becomes universal; woman particular. Women become relatives, only registered as existing when existing in relation to men. We can now deepen the formulation I offered in chapter 6: women as female relatives. To become woman is to become relative: not only in the sense of kin (connected by blood or marriage) but also in the fundamental sense of considered (only) in relation or proportion to something else. We encounter the universal as a wall when we refuse to become relative. And note how we come to understand these distinctions (such as universal and relative) not as abstractions, but in everyday social life, which is to say, through being in a world with others. No wonder that by starting here, by starting with what gets thrown up in a concrete exchange, we generate concepts: sweaty concepts. We muscle in on a world from trying to be in a world.

Lesbian feminism gives us the tools to make sense of the sexism that becomes all the more striking when women exit from the requirements of compulsory heterosexuality (which is, in effect, a citational relational, a requirement to live a life by citing men). For her to appear, she might have to fight. If this is true for women, it is even truer for lesbians. Women with women at a table are hard to see (and by *table* here I am referring to the mechanisms of social gathering, a table as what we are assembled around). For a gathering to be complete, a man is the head. A table of women: a body without a head.

**Data as wall.**

You turn up at a hotel with your girlfriend and you say you have booked a room. A hesitation can speak volumes. This reservation says your booking is for a double bed. Is that right, madam? Eyebrows are raised; a glance slides over the two of you, catching enough detail. Are you sure, madam? Yes, that’s right; a double bed. You have to say it, again; you have to say it, again, firmly. In chapter 1, I introduced a formula: rolling eyes = feminist pedagogy. Another formula:

**Raised eyebrows = lesbian feminist pedagogy.**

Really, are you sure? This happens again and again; you almost come to expect it, the necessity of being firm just to receive what you have requested. Disbelief follows you wherever you go, still. One time after a querying—are

you sure madam, are you sure, madam—you enter the room: twin beds. Do you go down; do you try again? It can be trying. Sometimes it is too trying; it is too much; and you pull your two little beds together; you find other ways of huddling.

A history can become concrete through the repetition of such encounters, encounters that require you to put the whole of your body, as well as your arms, behind an action.<sup>2</sup> Maybe these actions seem small. Maybe they are small. But they accumulate over time. They can feel like a hammering, a chip, chip, chip against your being, so that eventually you begin to feel smaller, hammering as hammered down.

**Actions that seem small can also become wall.**

### **AN ORDINARY BATTLE**

An ordinary is what we might be missing when we feel that chip, chip, chip. An ordinary can be what we need to survive that chip, chip, chip. Susan Griffin remembers a scene for us, a scene that has yet to happen:

I remember a scene. . . . This from a film I want to see. It is a film made by a woman about two women who live together. This is a scene from their daily lives. It is a film about the small daily transformations which women experience, allow, tend to, and which have been invisible in this male culture. In this film, two women touch. In all ways possible they show knowledge of. What they have lived through and what they will yet do, and *one sees in their movements how they have survived*. I am certain that one day this film will exist. (cited in Becker et al. 1981, emphasis mine)

Lesbian feminism: to remember a scene that has yet to happen, a scene of the ordinary; of the movements, little movements, which tell the story of our survival. It is a touching scene. Sometimes you have to battle for an ordinary. When you have to battle for an ordinary, when battling becomes ordinary, the ordinary can be what you lose.

**Even if we lose it, we have a glimpse of it.**

**A loss can be a glimpse.**

**Moments can become movements.**

Think of this: how for many women, life has been understood as a sphere of immanence, as dwelling in, not rising above; she is there; there she is; not transcending things by creating things. A masculinist model of creativity is premised on withdrawal. She is there; there she is: engaged in the endless repetitive cycle

of housework. We can follow Adrienne Rich, who makes this starting point into an instruction: “Begin with the material,” she says, with “matter, mma, madre, mutter, moeder, modder” (1986, 213). Lesbian feminism is materialist right from the beginning. If women are expected to be here, in matter, in materiality, in work, at work, this is where lesbian feminism begins. We begin in the lodge where we are lodged. We begin with the lodge when we are dislodged.

A poignant lesbian scene of ordinary life is provided by the first of the three films that make up *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (dir. Jane Anderson, 2000). We begin with that ordinary: we begin with its warmth. The quietness of intimacy: Edith and Abby, going to see a film together, coming home together. Yes maybe there are comments made by some kids on the street, but they are used to it: they have each other, a place to return to; home becomes shelter, a place to withdraw to.

**Everything is shattered, when Abby slips and falls.**

**Everything shatters.**

We are in the hospital waiting room. Edith is waiting to hear how Abby is. Another woman arrives, visibly upset, and says, “They just took my husband in. He had a heart attack.” Edith comforts her. When this woman asks about Edith’s husband, Edith replies, “I never had a husband.” And the woman says, “That’s lucky, because you won’t have the heartbreak of losing one.” The history of heterosexuality is presented as a history of broken hearts, or even just a history of hearts. To be recognized as having a heart is to be recognized as having the potential to be broken. With such recognition comes care, comfort, support. Without recognition, even one’s grief cannot be supported or held by the kindness of another.

And so Edith waits. The temporality of this wait feels like a shudder, as each moment passes, as we wait with her, the mood of the film becoming unbearably sad, as it lingers over her loss by lingering. When she asks the hospital staff to see Abby they say, “Only family are allowed.” She is excluded from the sphere of intimates. She is a nonrelative, or not-family. The nurse asks, “Is she any relation of yours, madam?” She replies, “I’m a friend, a very good friend.” They respond only with another question, “Does she have any family?” The friend disappears in the weight of the address. The recognition of family ties as the only ties that are binding means Abby dies alone; it means Edith waits all night, alone. Their relationship is hidden as friendship, while friendship itself becomes produced as a lesser tie, less binding, another kind of fragile. The power of the distinction between friends and family is legislative, as if only family counts, as if other relationships are not real, or simply are not.

When lesbian grief is not recognized, because lesbian relationships are not recognized, then you become nonrelatives. You become unrelated; you become not. You are alone in your grief. You are left waiting.

**We know this history. It is a history of what we know.**

Support is how much you have to fall back on when you fall. In chapter 2, I suggested that heterosexuality can be understood as an elaborate support system. And in chapter 7, I considered how fragility is unevenly distributed. To leave a support system can mean to become more fragile, less protected from the bumps of ordinary life. Class of course can be understood in these terms. To be middle or upper class is to have more resources to fall back on when you fall. What is behind you can be what holds you up; what is behind you can stop you from going down.

To say that heterosexuality can do the work of holding you up when you fall shows how intersectionality is not only about stopping and starting, as I discussed in chapter 5, but also a matter of ups and downs. Maybe if the life you live severs a family tie or snaps a bond, one that would otherwise have held you up when things break up, then you have left not only heterosexuality but the stability of a class position as a way of accessing resources.<sup>3</sup> To leave heterosexuality can be to leave those institutional forms of protecting, cherishing, holding. When things break, your whole life can then unravel. So much feminist and queer invention comes from the necessity of creating our own support systems.

When family is not there to prop you up, when you disappear from family life, you have to find other ways of being supported. When you disappear from family life: does this happen to you? You go home, you go back home. And it feels like you are watching yourself disappear: watching your own life unravel, thread by thread. No one has willed or intended your disappearance. Just slowly, just slowly, as talk of family, of heterosexuality as the future, of lives that you do not live, just slowly, just slowly, you disappear. They welcome you; they are kind, but it is harder and harder to breathe. And then when you leave, you might go and find a lesbian bar or queer space; it can be such a relief. You feel like a toe liberated from a cramped shoe: how you wiggle about! And we need to think about that: how the restriction of life when heterosexuality remains a presumption can be countered by creating spaces that are looser, freer, not only because you are not surrounded by what you are not but because you are reminded there are many ways to be. Lesbian bars, queer space: wiggle room.

The loss of possibility can be experienced as a physical restriction. The remainder of this short film depicts the arrival of Abby's family for the funeral.

Before they arrive, Edith removes traces of their relationship from the house, including photographs from the wall, exposing the lighter spaces underneath. If relationships leave traces on the wall so too does the removal of those relationships. The house is figured as a zone of intimacy; their love literally occupies the walls, keeping them busy. The house is not represented as property, but as a space in which they have extended themselves; mementos, cards, photographs; their intimacy leaves an impression on the walls. A photo of them marching, traces of the lesbian and gay histories of activism that allow this zone to become theirs. The objects that Edith takes down are objects that embody their love, which create their own horizon. These objects betray their secret. The removal of signs of their intimacy empties the house, re-creating the house as a vacant space, as if the walls too must wait.

**If the walls could talk, what would they say?**

**We need the walls to talk.**

**What a story.**

When Abby's family arrive, the house is transformed from a zone of intimacy into property. The house was in Abby's name. There is no will. The objects, the house itself; it belongs to Abby's family.

**The walls, too; they belong too.**

**They hold up the master's residence; the family home.**

When Abby's family arrive, they occupy the house. Edith becomes their guest. Abby's nephew says, "I have no problem with you staying here. Maybe we can work out some sort of rental situation." Staying becomes a question of receiving his hospitality: he has the power to lend the house, which is the same power as the power to take it away. Indeed, the objects that embody their lesbian intimacy are taken away, by being transformed into property, as something that can be taken: they keep asking, "What was Aunt Abby's?" as a way of asking, "What is ours?" When a lesbian feminist past is reassembled as a heterosexual present, the future, her future, is lost.

**It is a situation.**

**A sad, sad situation.**

The sadness of the situation unfolds through things: they embody Edith's life; her life with Abby. But for Abby's relatives, these things were Abby's; they become objects that are inheritable. In particular, Abby's china porcelain birds, her most loved and precious objects, become the site of contestation over family values and the value of family. The daughter of her nephew—Alice, let's give her a name—says to Edith, "They are beautiful." When Alice picks up one of the birds, Edith says, "I gave her that one. It's a lovely gift." In the following ex-



change between Edith and Alice, we have a partial recognition of loss—which in underdescribing that loss works to annul the force of recognition. “It must be very sad for you to lose such a good friend.” To which Edith replies, inadequately, “Yes it is.” At this moment, Edith’s face is blank, her eyes glimmering; she withholds. The affirmative response, “Yes it is,” becomes a disavowal of the loss, a way of keeping the loss a secret, a way of keeping what was lost a secret.

It is at this moment that Edith is undone. For having said yes to this, Alice says, “I think you should have something of hers to remember her by. I would really like for you to pick one of these birds to have as a keepsake.” These objects that signify her love for Abby, and Abby’s love, are taken away in the very gesture of being returned: of being turned into a gift, a keepsake, as if she must be grateful for this return. The objects that Abby loved most, which were part of her, become kinship objects for Ted’s family; they become family relatives, maybe even female relatives (if hers then ours), what can be inherited, objects to be passed down the family line, objects that give family its form. It is this loss, the loss of what her lover loved, that is too much.

**Too much; it is too much.**

**Things shatter.**

There are many ways to tell the story of recognition because there are many stories to tell. The desire for recognition is not necessarily about having access to a good life or being included in the institutions that have left you shattered. It is not even necessarily an aspiration for something: rather, it comes from the experience of what is unbearable, what cannot be endured. The desire for a bearable life is a desire for a life where suffering does not mean you lose your bearings when you become unhoused, when the walls come up, when they secure the rights of some to occupy space by the dispossession of others. The desire for a bearable life is a desire to have an ordinary life, an ordinary that is far more precious than property; indeed, an ordinary is what is negated when things become property, when things become alienable things, when things become family possessions.

I am not saying a desire for an ordinary does not take an institutional form, or that a zone of intimacy that covers the walls does not end up being an aspiration for a property, making things ours, so they cannot be taken away. There is more in an aspiration not to be unhoused than an aspiration for a house. To aspire is to breathe. With breath comes imagination. With breath comes possibility.

Perhaps a lesbian feminist struggle for recognition comes out of rage against the injustice of how some dwell by the dispossession of others. Per-

haps the signs of this struggle are neutralized by being represented as a gift. As Sarah Schulman (1998, 102) has shown, when recognition is understood as a gift from the straight world, our collective labor and struggle are forgotten. It is like Edith being given the bird as a keepsake, as if that bird was theirs to give, rather than something that matters because it marks what was created by her and Abby being together; the effort to be together.

We have to keep trying. We want the walls to come down. Or, if they stay up, we want the walls to talk, to tell our story. A story too can shatter: a thousand tiny little pieces, strewn all over the place. Lesbian feminism: in making an ordinary out of the shattered pieces of a dwelling, we dwell.

**We dwell, we tell.**

**How telling.**

### **A WILLFULNESS ARCHIVE**

I have noted how actions that are small can also become wall. Lesbian feminism might involve small actions. Maybe the chip, chip, chip of hammering can be transformed into a hammer: if he is a chip off the old block, we chip, chip, chip away at that block. Chip, chip, chip, who knows, eventually it might come right off. To persist in chipping at the blocks of heteropatriarchy, we have to become willful. I want to think of lesbian feminism as a willfulness archive, a living and a lively archive made up and made out of our own experiences of struggling against what we come up against, developing some of my arguments from chapter 3.

We could begin with the very figure of the lesbian feminist; how willful she is, how striking. She is without question a killjoy figure; so often coming up as being anti, antisex, antifun; antilife. The investment in her misery needs to be understood as just that: an investment. To live out a lesbian life is to become willingly estranged from the causes of happiness. No wonder she causes unhappiness.

It is important to note here that the investment in the misery of lesbians can also be detected even within queer studies. In some queer literatures, lesbian feminism itself appears as a miserable scene that we had to get through, or pass through, before we could embrace the happier possibility of becoming queer. For instance, Beatriz Preciado (2012), in a lecture on queer bulldogs, refers to lesbians as ugly with specific reference to lesbian styles, fashions, and haircuts. The lesbian appears as an abject figure we were all surely happy to have left behind, even if she continues to stalk queer talks as a reminder of a

failed project. I suspect this reference to the ugliness of lesbians is intended as ironic, even playful. But of course contemporary sexism and homophobia is often ironic and playful. I don't find it particularly amusing.

And indeed what is also noticeable is how this investment in miserable lesbians leads to an erasure of the inventiveness in lesbian histories described in the previous section as a desire to be ordinary in a world in which your desires take you out of the ordinary. The bits and pieces from lesbian histories that are understood as more redeemable (for example, butch / femme as erotic styles or modes of being) become rewritten as a queer history, or a history of how queerness came to be. Of course there were moments in lesbian feminist history when butch and femme were critiqued as imitating the gender system, or when the butch lesbian was herself rendered a pale imitation of a man (moments that exposed the class as well as racial specificity of lesbian ideals); but that was not exhaustive either as a moment or as a critique. Lesbians are not a step on a path that leads in a queer direction.

**A willful lesbian stone is not a stepping stone.**

**Try stepping on a stone butch and see what happens.**

More is at stake in lesbian feminism as a politics of willfulness than how the figure of the lesbian feminist is menacing and miserable. Willfulness is also behind us. We can listen to who is behind us. Julia Penelope describes lesbianism as willfulness: "The lesbian *stands against* the world created by the male imagination. What *willfulness* we possess when we claim our lives!" (1992, 42, first emphasis mine). Marilyn Frye's radical feminism uses the adjective *willful*: "The willful creation of new meaning, new loci of meaning, and new ways of being, together, in the world, seems to me in these mortally dangerous times the best hope we have" (1992, 9). Together these statements are claims to willfulness as a lesbian and radical feminist politics, and I want us to think about the connections between them: willfulness as standing against; willfulness as creativity.

When a world does not give us standing, to stand is to stand against that world. And when a world does not give us standing, we have to create other ways of being in the world. You acquire the potential to make things, create things. Lesbian feminism: the actualization of a potential we have to make things. A movement is assembled by those who keep encountering in their everyday life what they stand against. Lesbian feminism is radical feminism (in the sense of feminist at its root) and thus lesbian feminism demands our full involvement; as Marilyn Frye describes, "Bodily energy, ardour, intelligence, vitality" all need "to be available and engaged in the creation of a world for women" (1991, 14).

To be engaged in the creation of a world for women is to transform what it means to be women. Let me explain what I mean by this by going back to the words. The history of the word *woman* teaches us how the categories that secure personhood are bound up with a history of ownership: *woman* is derived from a compound of *wif* (wife) and *man* (human being); woman as wife-man also suggesting woman as female servant. The history of woman is impossible to disentangle from the history of wife: the female human not only as in relation to man but as for man (woman as there for, and therefore, being for). We can make sense of Monique Wittig's (1992) audacious statement, "Lesbians are not women." She argues that lesbians are not women because "women" is being in relation to men: for Wittig, "women" is a heterosexual category, or a heterosexual injunction. To become a lesbian is to queer woman by wrestling her away from him. To create a world for women is to cease to be women for. To be a woman with a woman or a woman with women (we do not need to assume a couple form) is to become what Wittig calls an "escapee" or a stray. To be a lesbian is to stray away from the path you are supposed to follow if you are to reach the right destination. To stray is to deviate from the path of happiness. We deviate from the category "women" when we move toward women. Or if a lesbian is a woman, if we wrestle her away from this history, she is a willful woman.

Willful woman: how striking! Willful woman: how queer! By holding on to the figure of the lesbian as full of potential, we are not giving up on queer; rather, we are refusing to assume being queer means giving up on lesbian feminism.<sup>4</sup> In chapter 7, I drew on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of how the potential of queer resides in how it is cleaved to everyday childhood scenes of shame. Queer arrives as an affective inheritance of an insult.<sup>5</sup> That queer became an insult directed to sexual minorities refers us back to earlier meanings of queer as odd or strange. The lesbian as a figure might even overinherit queerness: in a heteropatriarchal world there might be nothing odder, or more striking, than women who have as their primary sexual and life partners other women. Lesbians: queer before queer.

Lesbian feminism: how revolting! We are revolting against the requirement to be in relation to men; we are revolting against the demand to be female relatives. Lesbian feminism: how we revolt; how we become revolting. The classic piece "Woman Identified Woman" by Radicalesbians thus begins with an explosive speech act: "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion" (1970, n.p.). This speech act renders the lesbian herself into a tipping point, a breaking point, what I called in the previous chapter

feminist snap. She comes to embody the collective rage of women against the requirement to live their lives in relation to men, to become female relatives to the male universal. Such a rage, however, is only part of the story being told; becoming lesbian is an energetic becoming, a redirecting of women's energies away from the labor of maintaining relationships with men as our primary relationships.

A lesbian withdraws from a system that requires that she make herself available to men. Many antifeminist as well as antilesbian arguments explain and pathologize her withdrawal. One of the primary ways is through the explanation that lesbianism begins with disappointment; that some women become lesbians because they are not desirable to men; she is understood as a weak substitute, she yet again as not he. She can't get him so she settles for her.<sup>6</sup>

The rendering of the lesbian into an abject figure is an orientation device, a way of signaling the danger of not orientating your life as a woman around men. She acquires utility as a reminder of the unhappy consequence of getting things wrong. This statement by Radicalesbians shows exactly how abjection is used as a warning:

As long as the label "dyke" can be used to frighten women into a less militant stand, keep her separate from her sisters, keep her from giving primacy to anything other than men and family—then to that extent she is controlled by the male culture. Until women see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men, thus affirming their second-class status. As long as male acceptability is primary—both to individual women and to the movement as a whole—the term lesbian will be used effectively against women. Insofar as women want only more privileges within the system, they do not want to antagonize male power. They instead seek acceptability for women's liberation, and the most crucial aspect of the acceptability is to deny lesbianism—i.e., to deny any fundamental challenge to the basis of the female. But why is it that women have related to and through men? By virtue of having been brought up in a male society, we have internalized the male culture's definition of ourselves. That definition consigns us to sexual and family functions, and excludes us from defining and shaping the terms of our lives. (1970, n.p.)

The dyke is frightening. To become a dyke is not to be frightened off from militancy. To become a dyke is thus to become militant. She represents a cutoff point. For feminisms that are about becoming acceptable (code: more

acceptable to men, or more acceptable to those who are being asked to give up some of their power), lesbians are still unacceptable; lesbianism stands for what is unacceptable; the woman who goes astray is the one who does make becoming acceptable to men her way. Or the work of being lesbian without losing face is the work of becoming as acceptable as one can be, the kind of diversity work I described in chapter 5 as institutional passing. Shiny happy lesbians: you can polish yourself by removing traces of dykes and other more frightening lesbian tendencies.

If in becoming woman we have already been directed a certain way, then to become woman in a different way requires a reorientation. To become woman can often mean, in this context, becoming unrelated. It requires work; the effort of redirection, turning away from men as turning the wrong way. At the end of the film *A Question of Silence*, discussed in chapter 8, we witness this work. When Janine exits the courtroom her husband signals to her to come to him. He beeps the horn of his car, aggressively. I hear that beep as the sound of patriarchy: attend to me; turn to me; listen to me; come back to me. But Janine does not turn to him, return to him; she turns instead toward the other women who have left the room. It is a subtle movement. It is a small step. But it is the beginning of a reorientation. When eventually Janine can turn away from the man who demands her attention, toward other women, it is only because something has already snapped, a bond not only to an individual man as a sexual and life partner, but to the world that makes that bond that which demands the fullness of her attention. Snap is what allows her turning, what allows her to see the women who are already there: right by her side. To identify as lesbian is to turn toward women, which, given the system we live in, requires an active and perpetual turning away from men.

In the statement “Woman Identified Woman,” this turning toward women is described in terms of energy. They note, “On one level, which is both personal and political, women may withdraw emotional and sexual energies from men, and work out various alternatives for those energies in their own lives” (Radicalesbians 1970). I think woman identification has been read too quickly as being about gender expression. Woman identification here is about refusing as women to identify with male culture. To refuse to identify is to withdraw your own energy from relationships to men. You often have to become willful to withdraw that energy because you are expected to allocate it that way. Even to withdraw your energy from relationships to men will then be pathologized as hatred of men. This is why the lesbian appears so regularly as a man hater. And this is why woman identification makes woman such a willful subject;

she is willful when she is not willing to put her energies into her relationships with men; she is willful by how she redirects her attention. We could reclaim Adrienne Rich's (1993) somewhat maligned term "lesbian continuum" on similar grounds: not as taking the sex out of lesbianism (by putting friendships between women on the same continuum with sexual relationships) but as a call to redirect our attention.<sup>7</sup> To attend to women, we have to unlearn how we have learned to screen women out. We have to learn not to pass over her, just as we have been passed over.

It is something to aim for. When you aim not to reproduce a world that directs attention to men, you are threatening. When your being threatens life, you have to wrap life around being.

You have to wrap life around being. I would suggest that it is transfeminism today that most recalls the militant spirit of lesbian feminism in part because of the insistence that crafting a life is political work. Transfeminist manifestos carry the baton of radical lesbian manifestos such as "Woman Identified Woman": from Sandy Stone's (2006) "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" to Julia Serano's (2007) "Trans Woman Manifesto" and Susan Stryker's (1994) "My Words to Victor Frankenstein." These texts assemble a politics from what they name: showing not only how the sex-gender system is coercive, how it restricts what and who can be, but how creativity comes from how we survive a system that we cannot dismantle by the force of our will alone (no matter how willful we are).

The monsters will lead the way. Susan Stryker describes how the transsexual appears as monster within some lesbian and gay writing. Rather than distancing herself from this figure, Stryker claims her, becomes her; a proximity initiated as a politics of transgender rage: "Through the operation of rage, the stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power" (1994, 261).

**Remember, resonance.**

**Abject within feminism**

**Monstrosity**

When lesbians insisted on speaking within feminist spaces, we were rendered monstrous: think back to Betty Friedan's description of a lesbian presence as a "lavender menace," a description that lesbian feminists such as Rita Mae Brown were willing to take up as their own. For Stryker, being willing to be the monster becomes a matter of how you live your life: "May your rage inform your actions and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world" (1994, 254). A political struggle can be the struggle to transform your world. It can take willfulness to bring politics back to life.

Willfulness might seem to be about an individual subject, as the one who has to become willful just to exist. She matters; to become a subject for some is to become a willful subject. But it is important not to reduce willfulness to individualism, as I have noted previously. We can think here of the character Molly Bolt from Rita Mae Brown's (1973) classic lesbian novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle*. It is interesting to note how this novel has been challenged by some critics for its individualism. Kim Emery in her reading of the novel strains hard (in the best way) to be sympathetic. But she notes, "I find it difficult to read *Rubyfruit Jungle* as being anything other than the simplistic, essentialist, and effectively anti-feminist aggrandizement of American individualism that critics like Bonnie Zimmerman hold it to be" (Emery 2002, 126). Emery in her reading also draws upon Rita Mae Brown's feisty lesbian feminist text *A Plain Brown Rapper*, in which Brown (1976, 126) describes woman identification as an ongoing activity, as a persistent practice of selfhood and solidarity. I think reading Molly Bolt through the lens of willfulness allows us to understand that actions that can be diagnosed as individualism provide the basis of lesbian feminist rebellion against social norms and conventions such as the family. When you fight against the family, you are often understood as fighting for yourself. Rebellion is dismissible as individualism. The word *willfulness* registers this dismissal.

I offered a reading of *Rubyfruit Jungle* in my book *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed 2010) as one instance of the genre of what I called female troublemaker fiction. Somewhat surprisingly (even to myself, looking back) Molly Bolt did not pop up in *Willful Subjects* (Ahmed 2014), though maybe she lent a hand to the many willful arms that haunted the pages. Molly is appealing. She captures something for us as lesbian readers precisely because of her willful energy: she is too much; she has to be too much, if she is not to be brought down by what she comes up against. It would be easy to dismiss this concern with character as individualism. For those who have to struggle to be, to become an individual is a profoundly communal achievement.

It is not surprising that girls who want girls are found to have wills that are wanting. A willful lesbian might be the one who makes bad object choices. A bad choice is when you willingly want the wrong things, the things you are supposed to give up, as well as willfully not wanting the right things, those that would or should secure your happiness. A willful lesbian archive is thus not only an unhappy archive, even though it includes unhappiness. As Elizabeth Freeman suggests, we might be able to glimpse in our archives "historically



specific forms of pleasure” that have not been “subsumed into institutional forms” (2005, 66). Molly is not subsumed; her pleasures leak all over the place. She says in response to a question of how many women she has slept with: “Hundreds. I’m irresistible” (200). *Rubyfruit Jungle* offers us a story of a queer girl who refuses to give up her desires, even if they take her outside the horizon of happiness, even though they get her into trouble. When Molly is brought to the dean’s office after rumors of lesbianism at film college, she is asked by the dean about her problem with girls, and replies:

“Dean Marne, I don’t have any problems relating to girls and I’m in love with my roommate. She makes me happy.” Her scraggly red eyebrows with the brown pencil glaring through shot up. “Is this relationship with Faye Raider of an, uh—intimate nature?” “We fuck, if that’s what you’re after.” I think her womb collapsed on that one. Sputtering, she pressed forward. “Don’t you find that somewhat of an aberration? Doesn’t this disturb you, my dear? After all, it’s not normal.” “I know it’s not normal for people in this world to be happy, and I’m happy.” (127)

Rather than being disturbed by being found disturbing, Molly performs the ultimate act of defiance, by claiming her happiness as abnormal. It is as if queers, by doing what they want, expose the unhappiness of having to sacrifice personal desires, in the perversity of their twists and turns, for the happiness of others.

**The lesbian who persists is misdirected.**

**She is willing to be misdirected.**

**She is willing to miss.**

**Willfulness: not missing what you miss.**

Despite all her charm, and her rather infectious enthusiasm for lesbian life worlds, it is not that Molly’s experiences are happy ones, in the sense that she is able to make and get her way. Indeed, throughout, her experiences involve discrimination: violence and rejection from would-be lovers, who cannot bear the consequences of following queer desire out of the forms of recognition delivered by a straight world. She is just not defeated by these experiences. Of course, we need to take care to avoid turning characters such as Molly into good object lessons: as if we could create a moral imperative from the example of her fictional life. But we can still be infected by her enthusiasm that spills all over the pages, her refusal to be brought down. For me, as a lesbian feminist reader, characters like Molly Bolt with a spring in their step pick me up; feisty

characters whose vitality is not at the expense of their lesbian desire, but how their desire roams across the pages.

If we think of lesbian feminism as a willfulness archive, we are not simply directing our attention to characters such as Molly Bolt, however appealing. A willfulness archive would derive as much from our struggle to write ourselves into existence as from who appears in what we write. This intimacy of standing against and creativity can take the form of a book.

**A willful girl in a book**

**A willful girl as a book**

**I am rather taken by you**

Gloria Anzaldúa describes her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as follows: “The whole thing has had a mind of its own, escaping me and insisting on putting together the pieces of its own puzzle with minimal direction from my will. It is a rebellious, willful entity, a precocious girl-child forced to grow up too quickly” ([1987] 1999, 88). A book, a survival strategy, comes alive, acquires a life of its own, a will of its own, a willful will; history by the bone, own but not alone.

Lesbian feminism of color: the struggle to put ourselves back together because within lesbian shelters too our being was not always accommodated. I think of a brown history, a mixed history as a lesbian history, another way in which we can tell a history of women being in relation to women. I think of my own history, as a mixed lesbian, so many sides, all over the place. I think of all that lesbian potential as coming from somewhere. Brownness has a lesbian history, because there are brown lesbians in history; whether or not you could see us, whether or not you knew where to find us.

Intersectionality: let’s make a point of how we come into existence. I am not a lesbian one moment and a person of color the next and a feminist at another. I am all of these at every moment. And lesbian feminism of color brings this all into existence, writing of all existence, with insistence, with persistence. There can be so much labor to bring ourselves about. When being is laboring, we are creating more than ourselves. Lesbian feminism of color is a lifeline made up out of willful books that had to insist on their own creation. Books are themselves material, paper, pen, ink, even blood. Words come out of us, like sweat, like blood; tears. Your texts are littered with love. Words can pulse with life; words as flesh, leaking; words as heart, beating.

**A poem weeps**

Audre Lorde spoke of herself as a writer when she was dying. For Lorde, writing was a survival strategy. She says, “I am going to write fire until it comes

out of my ears, my eyes, my noseholes—everywhere. Until it's every breath I breathe. I'm going to go out like a fucking meteor!" (1988, 76–77).

**And so she did**

**And so she did**

She goes out; she makes something. She calls this capacity to make things through heat "the erotic." Lorde describes, "There is a difference between painting a black fence and writing a poem, but only one of quantity. And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love" (1984a, 58). Words flicker with life, like the sunlight on her body.

**A love poem**

**A lover as poem**

I am warmed by the thought; of how we create things; of how we break open a container to make things. We watch the words spill. They spill all over you. I think too of Cherrie Moraga's poem "The Welder." Moraga speaks of heating being used to shape new elements, to create new shapes, "the intimacy of steel melting, the fire that makes sculpture of your lives, builds buildings" (1981, 219). We build our own buildings when the world does not accommodate our desires. When you are blocked, when your very existence is prohibited or viewed with general suspicion or even just raised eyebrows (yes they are pedagogy), you have to come up with your own systems for getting things through. You might even have to come up with your own system for getting yourself through.

**How inventive**

**Quite something**

**Not from nothing**

**Something from something**

**A kitchen table becomes a publishing house**

We assemble ourselves around our own tables, kitchen tables, doing the work of community as ordinary conversation. Lesbian feminist world making is nothing extraordinary; I have tried to show how lesbian feminist world making is quite ordinary. The ordinary can be what you are for. For: it comes from not. To stand against what is, we make room for what is not. Or even: we are for what is not. We might think of the work of making room as wiggling, a corporeal willfulness; like that toe that wiggles about in a shoe. A lesbian does not toe the line. Lesbians (as lesbians well know) have quite a wiggle; you have to wiggle to make room in a cramped space. We can be warmed by the work required to be together even if we sometimes wish it was less work. To recall

the vitality of lesbian feminism as a resource of the present is to remember that effort required for our shelters to be built. When we have to shelter from the harshness of a world, we build a shelter.

Lesbian feminism gives us the tools to build a world in which we become each other's building blocks. We love our cobuilders; they are our lovers, which is not to say that we might not struggle at times to agree about what we are making. We have to find spaces that are for women: and for women means, for those who are assigned or assign themselves as women, for those who willfully accept being women as their assignment. And women's spaces are gradually being eroded, often through the assumption that they are no longer necessary. I have addressed this problem in relation to women's studies (chapter 7). The time for women's studies is not over until universities cease to be men's studies. We must be willful to will this cessation.

We are willful when we are not willing to cease. To recall the vitality of lesbian feminism as a resource of the present is to stay attuned to that effort required for those shelters to be built, brick by brick; she had a hand in it.

#### **Helter-skelter**

##### **What a shelter**

The roots; back to routes. *Skelter* from *skelt*: "to hasten, scatter hurriedly." Scattered; shattered; confusion. The helter?

##### **Just there for the rhyme**

##### **Poetry in motion**

To build from the ruin; our building might seem ruined; when we build, we ruin. It is a lesbian feminist hope: to become a ruin, to ruin by becoming. How easily though without foundations, without a stable ground, the walls come down. We keep them up; we keep each other up. We might then think of fragility not so much as the potential to lose something, fragility as loss, but as a quality of relations we acquire, or a quality of what we build. A fragile shelter has looser walls, made out of lighter materials; see how they move. A movement is what is built to survive what has been built. When we loosen the requirements to be in a world, we create room for others to be.

## **CONCLUSION: INTERSECTIONALITY IS ARMY**

We could think of lesbian feminism as willful carpentry: she builds with her own hands; she is handy. Maybe I am thinking too of your arms, your strong butch arms and what they can do, whom they can hold; of how they can hold

me. If a feminist history is army, as I described in the conclusion of chapter 3, that history is also a history of lesbian arms.

**I think of being held by your arms**

**Yes, I do**

I want to return one last time to the Grimm story. I keep coming back to the story because the arm keeps coming up. Is the willful child a lesbian? Is the arm a lesbian? The arm certainly seems queer: to come up is to be wayward.

We could tell a few lesbian stories about arms. When arms are not employed, they disobey; they wander away. Arms can be “matter out of place,” to borrow an expression from the anthropologist Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002, 44), the sign of an improper residence. If you have the wrong arms, it means you are assumed to be in the wrong place. An example: A butch lesbian enters the female restroom. The attendant becomes flustered and says, “You are not supposed to be here.” The butch lesbian is used to this: how many of her stories are restroom stories; to pass as male becomes a question mark of your right to pass into female space. “I am a woman,” she says. We might have to assign ourselves with gender if we trouble the existing assignments. With a reassignment, she can go to the restroom. When she comes out, the attendant is embarrassed; the attendant points to her arm, saying, “So strong.” The butch lesbian allows the moment to pass by joking, giving the attendant a show of her arms.

With arms we come out, with arm we come in. If the strong arms are called upon to answer a questioning of a right to be there, they are called upon to assert a right to be there. However, these moments do not always pass so easily. Many of these histories of passing or of not passing are traumatic.<sup>8</sup> Arms don’t always help us get through. When arms are wayward, they can be beaten. If we told queer history as a history of arms, we would show the material consequences of being wayward. Arms after all can be gendering assignments. J. Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* notes with some surprise how Havelock Ellis uses the arm as a gender test in the case of Miss M.: “Miss M. he thinks, tries to cover over her masculinity but gives herself away to Ellis when he uses a rather idiosyncratic test of gender identification: ‘with arms, palmed up, extended in front of her with inner sides touching, she cannot bring the inner sides of the forearms together as nearly every woman can, showing that the feminine angle of the arm is lost’” (Halberstam 1998, 80). If the arminess of the queer female arm is detected by a straightening rod, the arm is not straightened. The arm can be the fleshy site of a disagreement. The wayward arm is another call to arms.

You note the connection between the strong arms of the black woman (who has to insist on being woman) discussed in chapter 3 and the strong arms of the butch lesbian (who has to insist on being woman) discussed here. These arms can, of course, belong to the same body. Throughout feminist history many women had to insist on being women before they became part of the feminist conversation. Trans women have to insist on being women; trans women often have to keep insisting, again and again, often in the face of violent and repeated acts of misgendering; any feminists who do not stand up, who do not wave their arms to protest against this misgendering, have become the straightening rods. An antitrans stance is an antifeminist stance; it is against the feminist project of creating worlds to support those for whom gender fatalism (boys will be boys, girls will be girls) is fatal; a sentencing to death. We have to hear that fatalism as punishment and instruction: it is the story of the rod, of how those who have wayward wills or who will waywardly (boys who will not be boys, girls who will not be girls) are beaten. We need to drown these antitrans voices out, raising the sound of our own. Our voices need to become our arms: rise up; rise up.

We can make an army connection: if gender norms operate to create a narrow idea of how a female arm should appear, a white arm, a slight arm, an arm that has not labored, an arm that is delicately attuned to an assignment, then many who understand themselves as women, who sign up to being women, will be deemed not women because of their arms. It is the arms that lead us astray.

Arms not only have a history; they are shaped by history; arms make history flesh. No wonder arms keep coming up. It is the arms that can help us make the connection between histories that otherwise do not seem to meet. There are many arms; arms that are muscular, strong, laboring arms, arms that refuse to be employed, striking arms; arms that are lost in service to the industrial machine; broken arms.

**Intersectionality is arm.**

**Intersectionality is army.**